



How to touch public interest in environmental data

Rede von Thomas Göttin am World Resource Forum WRF Davos, 12. Oktober 2015, zur Eröffnung des BAFU-Ausstellungstandes „Observe to take action“. Es gilt das gesprochene Wort.

Dear Guests

I'm pleased to give you a short opening speech about the stand of the FOEN „Observe to take action“ – so I will talk about “how to touch public interest in environmental data”.

When you walk outside – instead of following an indoor event like this one – you almost certainly collect environmental data: When leaves are falling and swallows preparing for departure, then you feel it is autumn. When it is raining or snowing outside, you use the data for an evaluation of your personal situation and then you adjust in a sort of co-evolution between you and your environment: you would wear a coat, take an umbrella. When you find a flood before your front door, you would think about prevention or even considering another settlement. Imagine a silent spring, the picture used by Rahel Carson more than 50 years ago, then you would all of a sudden feel: no data from singing birds – what a disturbing world. Observation of the environment is at the core of environmental policy: we need to use our ears, eyes, and our nose in the best scientific way. Changes in environment have become very subtle and often invisible, but still with big environmental impact, think about micropollutants or nanoparticles.

Certainly environmental data are important, and often we take for granted that we care about them and are ready to take action. But are we sure about that link between data, care and action? Take climate change: masses of data are provided by natural scientists, but do societies as a whole care, and is the action we take to reduce greenhouse gases adequate to what scientists expect us to do on the basis of their findings? Jonathan Lynn the communication officer of IPCC told me recently, that when took over five years ago, he was the first communication expert of IPCC ever. Before, thousands of scientists just supposed that their findings would, by whatever link, touch people and result in care and action which is obviously not the case. It becomes clear the natural and social scientist have to work together to understand the different links between science, society and politics and to establish coherence between data, care and action.

If you want to touch public interest, you have to adjust your communication. It would be nice if you present data in a manner that non-experts could understand. Data need to be explained. And this is – in my view, because communication is my passion – nothing boring or something that has to be done in extra time at night or when run out of budget. It is about connecting science and society, and it adds new elements to science too. So here we try to present different topics and data, about climate

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change, noise reduction, water quality and biodiversity. Go and have a look and judge if you understand and if you like it.

This stand has already been in Basel and Lausanne. Interestingly, the feedbacks of visitors in these two cities have been quite different: Lausanne is a dense, growing urban area, citizens are very concerned about noise, whereas in Basel, almost thirty years after Schweizerhalle, when a fire destroyed tons of chemicals in a storage depot and affected the water quality of the river Rhine, is still more interested in water quality. This underlines what I said at the beginning: People care about the data when these data can be connected with people's experience. More difficult to communicate is biodiversity. It is a scientific concept, whereas people are touched by animals and landscapes. For Davos we changed this part of the stand, you see bright glowing bullets. It is a game, try your skills. If you want to touch public interest, you need more: education. We see that especially in the field of biodiversity and climate change, knowledge is poor and in the case of biodiversity, with species disappearing, knowledge is even declining. Who is really caring about swallows leaving in autumn anymore? Who takes cuckoos as sign of spring? We definitely should do more about education all along the environmental issues that we have abundant data – because otherwise people are just losing the capacity of integrating these data in their daily lives.

If we want to go on to action, we should do even more: Involve people. You care more about what you feel responsible for than what you just consume. And for feeling responsible, you have to see what these data have to do with you. One way of involving people is citizen science, collecting data together. When you are stepping outside in the rain, the link of the observed data with yourself is obvious. When it is about water quality, the link is quite clear too. That is why some of the longest data sets in Switzerland are linked with water quality. And that is why for instance some of the most shared citizen science data are about European bathing quality of lakes and coastal areas. The FOEN is supporting public involvement in collecting data, and I am convinced that this participation will become even more important in coming years - for scientific reasons as well as for the sake of responsibility and eventually taking action of the society. Another way of involving especially enterprises is dialogue. FOEN is supporting dialogue about cost effective ways of reducing the use of natural resources, specialists for this dialogue will tomorrow be present at this stand.

By now, you might have already collected data about sandwiches, sweets and drinks in this room. According to my understanding: if data are available and understandable, and the link between you and the data is clear enough, then everybody is ready to take action.